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ABSTRACT

Findings of a literature review of school policies and procedures for school-based responses to death-related crises are presented in this paper. A rationale and guidelines for policy development and examples of practices for dealing with death-related incidents--such as suicide, homicide, drug overdose, and accidents--are described. Following an overview of the status of school-based practices, the conclusion is made that no scientific study has attempted to assess either the extent to which schools have established death-related crisis response policies or the effectiveness of alternative response practices. (25 references) (LMI)

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School District Policies for Response to Death-Related Crises: Fact or Fiction?

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School District Policies for Response to Death-Related Crises: Fact or Fiction?

Drawing from a variety of sources to compile a national picture of adolescent life, Uhlenberg and Eggebeen (1988) concluded that the well-being of adolescents in the United States declined significantly between 1960 and 1980. One indicator of this decline was an increase in rates of deaths due to violent causes including homicides, suicides, and automobile accidents. Adding drug overdoses to the causes, Podell (1989) observed that "many adolescents are . . . painfully affected by the loss of peers" (p. 64). The task of dealing with such social and psychological problems was assigned to schools with increasing frequency and vigor of demand during the 1980s (Thompson, 1990). Expectations for schools to assume a problem-solving role encompassed all levels of elementary and secondary education.

Despite their relative infrequency in a single school, death-related crises drew considerable attention in the literature of the 1980s. Numerous reports of death-related tragedies affecting school districts in diverse locales were addressed to board members, administrators, counselors, and psychology specialists as well as community mental health professionals. Most of the reported tragedies involved deaths of students, but some involved administrators (e.g.,

Barron, 1985) and teachers (e.g., Sorenson, 1989). Among the tragedies were deaths due to physical illness (Rist, 1984), automobile and other accidents (Christenberry, 1990; Podell, 1989), homicides (Arena, Hermann, & Hoffman, 1984; Collison et al., 1987; Zakariya, 1985), and suicides (Hunt, 1987; Sorenson; Wall & Viers, 1985; Zinner, 1987). More attention, generally speaking, was given to suicide deaths than to deaths by any other cause.

Not surprisingly, reports of death-related crises in schools were generally accompanied by descriptions of the schools' responses and recommendations for the handling of similar crises in the future. Often, the authors of these reports called for establishment--in advance of any death-related crisis--of policies and procedures to guide school-based responses. Zakariya (1985) wrote, "Crisis--LIKE LIGHTNING--might not strike twice in the same school system, but once can be more than enough if (the school) isn't prepared to handle the situation" (p. 29). Advance planning helps to facilitate effective and efficient responses to tragedies (McQuinn and O'Reilly, 1989).

In this paper, we present the findings of a review of literature relevant to policies and procedures for school-based responses in death-related crises. We include a rationale and guidelines for policy development as well as some specific examples of practices that have been reported

or suggested. We present the status of research related to school-based policies and interventions in death-related crises and offer our recommendations for the direction of future research.

Rationale and Guidelines for Policies

When effectively implemented, preplanned interventions can diminish the impact of death-related crises in schools (Sorenson, 1989), even to the point of saving lives (Siehl, 1990). School-based responses in the aftermath of death-related crises can prevent future crises; without responses, however, one death may lead to another (Thompson, 1990). The Phi Delta Kappa Task Force on Adolescent Suicide (1988) wrote, "Although there is no satisfactory explanation as to why cluster suicides occur, one factor often associated with them is the accidental death of a student known to the community" (p. 6). Podell (1989) described, for example, teenagers who considered suicide as a solution to their emotional pain following the deaths of their friends in an amusement park fire.

Although the prevention of future crises should be an adequately persuasive reason for preplanning school-based responses in death-related crises, it is not the only reason--nor even the most compelling reason--for many school board members and administrators. Legal issues may also enter the picture. According to Ruof and Harris (1989),

school districts are legally obligated to "provide services to other high risk children following a completed suicide" (p. 8). Given examples of teenagers who consider taking their own lives in the aftermath of their friends' deaths (Podell, 1989), one could argue that districts may be legally obligated to provide services following any death that impacts students. Districts that follow preplanned practices certainly are in less risk of legal jeopardy than those that appear to respond to crises based on the whimsy of their administrators (Clemmer, 1991).

Policies that guide school-based responses in death-related crises should be formulated by the same criteria as any other school policy. Policy refers to "an official action for a specified purpose. . . . policies are written down and shared with those subject to and responsible for enforcing them" (Duke & Canady, 1991, p. 2). The criteria that constitute this definition of policy are apparent in literature that describes school-based responding to death-related crises.

Crisis response policies should be "specific, written guidelines" (Kalafat, 1990, p. 365). The value of formal school board acknowledgement of crisis response plans was emphasized by Palmo, Langlois, & Bender (1988) who wrote, "policies . . . should pave the way for, and not stipulate, procedures" (p. 99). Burns (1990) suggested that crisis

response policies should be assembled into a manual that would be readily available to anyone who might have a need for it. He also recommended deliberate actions to make sure that parents are informed of the policies.

Lamb and Dunne-Maxim (1987) emphasized the relative nature of policies, noting that crisis responses should be tailored to fit individual schools based on their "specific circumstances, traditions, and resources" (p. 247). They offered a series of at least 13 questions that can be used to create individually-tailored policies for responding after a suicide. Whether individual tailoring actually does occur or not, distinctions certainly are evident among the practices that have been reported or suggested by different authors.

School-Based Practices in Death-Related Crises

Differences that exist with regard to the emotion-laden topic of responses in the aftermath of death-related crises are easily illustrated by comparing views of commemorative practices. For example, Wall and Viers (1985) advocated caution in deciding to have a memorial observance. They urged decision makers to "be aware that there is a fine line between dramatizing a death and doing something appropriate that allows students to express a sense of loss" (p. 6). Hunt (1987) expressed a less cautious view when she stated, "A voluntary memorial service or a couple of minutes of

silence . . . is a good way to establish the notion that everyone must begin the healing process and get on with life" (p. 37). Siehl (1990) agreed that "a memorial service or special event helps with closure and promotes healthy feelings with friends, families, and significant others in the life of (a) deceased child" (pp. 55-56). Lamb and Dunne-Maxim (1987) advocated tradition in the case of other types of death as the basis for decisions regarding memorial services or special assemblies after a suicide death.

With regard to school dismissal for funeral services, Collison et al. (1987) reported that all schools in the district were closed on the day of a murdered principal's funeral. Sorenson (1989), in contrast, reported a list of possible death-related crisis intervention strategies all of which implied that school would continue in session with some allowances being made for individuals who needed special attention. Wall and Viers (1985), reporting on the suicide death of a teacher, mentioned the need for planning to allow student and faculty to attend funeral services. However, they noted that plans were made to request that the time of the funeral "be set after school hours" (p. 102) if it had been held on a school day. McQuinn and O'Reilly (1989) stated firmly, "General operation of the school . . . must not be neglected . . . . It is important to carry on the usual school routines" (p. 95).

Zinner (1987) reported that she suggested to the sixth-grade classmates of a boy who committed suicide that they "plant a weeping willow tree on the school grounds as an enduring symbol of his life and of their sadness" (p. 500). Lamb and Dunne-Maxim (1987), in contrast, do not recommend placing any kind of physical memorial on school grounds where it may take on a mystical aura. McQuinn and O'Reilly (1989) indicated that decisions of this nature should not be rushed.

The contradictions in practice are accentuated by two of the guiding principles suggested by Lamb and Dunne-Maxim, (1987): "Nothing should be done to glamorize or dramatize a suicide" and "Doing nothing can be as dangerous as doing too much" (p. 248). In view of such contradictions, one is left to wonder which practices should be formalized in a school's written policy statements. Perhaps the answer can be found in an observation by McIntosh (1987) that practical research is needed.

Status of Research and Recommendations

Death-related crisis intervention policies are reported on the basis of subjective observation to be effective. Both Hunt (1987) and Sorenson (1989) offered personal testimony as to the effectiveness of the response plans they suggested. Yet, neither provided any documentation to support their claims. Apparently, reported and suggested

practices have evolved in accordance with Shipman's (1987) view. He said, "More research and evaluation of suicide prevention methods is certainly desirable, but principals cannot afford to delay the planning and implementation of programs that address this problem" (p. 1).

Our review revealed no scientific study that made any attempt to assess either the extent to which schools have established death-related crisis response policies or the effectiveness of alternate response practices or. Clearly, the time has come to heed the words of Kalafat and Ryerson (1991) as they wrote about school programs, "Rigorous evaluation components must be included in the design of suicide prevention efforts in the nineties" (p. 7).

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